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## CHAPTER XXII

## A Speech.

OVERLAND RED, sitting on a bowlder beside the road, stooped and gathered up a bouquet of pebbles. Then, for lack of other interest, he invented a game of ancient and honorable origin. "She loves me," he said, tossing away a pebble. "She loves me not." And up spun another pebble. So he continued until the pebbles were gone. "She loves me not," he muttered lugubrously. Then his face brightened. "Of course she don't. She loves him. That's what I was tryin' to get at, anyway."

He fumbled at a huge bunch of little red flowers called "humming birds' trumpets." He arranged the hastily constructed bouquet to suit him. Then he laid it on the rock.

"According to the latest book on good manners, or 'How to Be Happy Though Dressed Up,' this here bouquet is the proper thing. They'll think I'm some kid when I step out and present these here humming birds' bugs. Huh! I seen the two bosses gone, and I gets wise direct. But I got to brace up. Wonder what she'll think about me after hearin' what I said last night at the Old Meadow? Gee! I wonder what I did say? Did I cuss much? I forgot. H-m-m! Good mornin', folks! I see this here—them hummin'birds' bugs—flowers. Happy day—Collie, what's wrong with you? What you laughin' at?"

"You, of course. Where did you get the posies?"

"Picked 'em along the Golden Shore. Just got back."

"You do look scared, Red."

"Scared? You're gettin' personal, you needn't think because you just been there that I never will."

"Say, Overland, I—we"—began Collie.

"I knowed it! I won't say a word to nobody."

Collie glanced at Louise. She nodded. Then she gave Overland her hand. He seized it and stood looking into her sweet gray eyes. "Little Rose Girl," he said quietly, "you always was the best and kindest and beautifullest we ever knowed. It ain't the first time you give your hand to help them that ain't fit to touch it. If there is any Golden Shore I guess me and Collie will be there just because we knowed you down here and couldn't stay around nowhere where you wasn't. And believe me, if he don't treat you from now on like you was a plumb angel I'll—I'll ride him off the big range and into space quicker 'n shootin' stars! These here flowers is for you—not for that long-legged grasshopper ridin' your horse there. I should think Boyar would be plumb ashamed."

"Then Collie can walk," said Louise promptly. "Collie, will you please let Mr. Summers take Boyar? I want to talk with the president of our mine a little while."

"Don't faint, Chico," said Overland, swinging into the saddle. "I always was the 'cute little gopher with the ladies. You watch us ride up this trail if you want to see a pair that can ride."

Collie shook his fist at the grinning Overland, who had turned as he rode away. "You want to learn to act quick when a lady asks," called Overland. "You didn't get off this horse any too spry."

Then Collie stooped and picked up a little red flower that had dropped from the holsters one's offering.

The Marshalls and Billy Winthrop came in their car. The ride through the canyon had been pleasant. They were talking about Overland. They had been discussing the rearrangement of a great many things since the news of Louise's heritage had become known.

"You had better close the muffler, Billy. You are frightening that pony."

"That's the Yuma colt," said Winthrop. "Overland is riding her."

"Overland?"

"Yes. He's coming to meet us."

Plunging through the crackling greasewood at the side of the road, the Yuma colt leaped toward the car. In broad sombrero, blue silk neckerchief, blue fannel shirt and silver studded leather chaps, was a strangely familiar figure. The great silver spurs rang musically as the pony reared. The figure gave easily to the wild plunging of the horse, yet was as firm as iron in the saddle.

Anne drew a deep breath. It was not the grotesque, frockcoated Overland of a recent visit, nor was it the ragged, unkempt vision Louise had conjured up for her in relating the Old Meadow story. In fact, it was not Overland Red at all, but Jack Summers, the range rider of the old red Abilene days. He was clean shaven, vigorous, splendidly strong and confident. In the saddle, bedecked in his showy trappings, surrounded by his friends, Jack Summers had found his youth again, and the past was as a

closed book for the nonce.

"I'm the boss' envy extraordinary," said Overland by way of greeting. "Wait said something else, too, about bein' a potentary, but I reckon that was a joke."

"Good morning! Don't get down! Glad to see you again!"

But Overland was in the road, hat in hand and Yuma's bridle reins over one arm.

"Mornin', Billy! Mornin', doctor! You run right up to the house. I left the gate open."

Then Overland rode back, following them. Later he reappeared, minus spurs and chaps, but still clad in the garb of the range rider. He was as proud and happy as a boy. He seemed to have dropped ten years from his shoulders, and he was strangely unlike his old boisterous self withal.

The noon sun crept through the moon vine. Out on the wide veranda was the long table. They were a happy group at luncheon there. Even the taciturn Brand Williams had been persuaded to come. His native picturesqueness was rather effaced by a black, characterless suit of "store clothes."

Waiter Stone at the conclusion of the luncheon asked Overland to make a speech. Nothing daunted, Overland rose briskly.

"I expect you're lookin' for me to fall off the roof of the canyery into the tomato vat and make a large red splash. Not me. I got somethin' to say. Now, the difference in droppin' a egg on the kitchen floor and breakin' it calmlike in a saucer ain't only the mess on the floor; you save the egg. Just recent I come nigh to losin' my whole basket. You all know who saved 'em. Not namin' any names, the same person, by jest bein' herself and kind to everybody, put me wise to the fact that money and clothes ain't all that goes to make a man. And, at the same time, speakin' kind of orthodoxical, money and clothes has a whole lot to do with makin' a man. I just got hep to that idea recent."

"Speakin' of clothes leads me to remark that I got a new outfit up at the bunk house. It's a automobile's outfit. He Billy says it's the correct thing. He helps me pick it out, which leads Billy into this here thing too. He said to break the news gentle and not scare anybody to death and not get 'em to thinkin' that somebody was hurt or anything like that, so I'm breakin' it to you easy. Me an' Billy is goin' away. We're goin' in the Guzzuh—'God save the mush,' as the pote says. We are the Overland Red Towelst and Observation company, unlimited. We are goin'."

"Round the world and back again; heel and toe in sun and rain"—as another pote says. Only we ride. I ain't got nothin' to say about gettin' married or happy days or any of that ordinary kind of stuff. I want to drink the health of my friends. I got so many and such good ones that I daren't to incriminate any particular one, so I say, 'lookin' at your faces like roses and lilies and—fades, I say—'Here's to California, the darling of the west."

A blessing on those living here—And God help all the rest."

Overland set down amid applause. He located his tobacco and papers, rolled a cigarette with one hand and gazed across the hills. Glancing up, he saw Louise looking at him. He smiled. "I was settin' on a crazy bronc' holdin' his head up so he couldn't go to buckin' outside a little adobe down in Yuma, Ariz, then. Did you ever drift away like that just from some little old trick to make you dream?"

"At a nod from Aunt Eleanor they all rose."

Louise stepped from her end of the table to where Overland stood gazing out across the hills. Glancing up, he saw Louise looking at him. He smiled. "I was settin' on a crazy bronc' holdin' his head up so he couldn't go to buckin' outside a little adobe down in Yuma, Ariz, then. Did you ever drift away like that just from some little old trick to make you dream?"

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